

Open Project Selection Process
Land and Water Conservation Fund Program
California Department of Parks and Recreation

INTRODUCTION

Since 1965, the State's annual Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) apportionments have been allocated among state agencies and shared with local units of government. Distribution of funds has been on the basis of the formula contained in Section 5099.12 of the Public Resources Code. Selection of local grants is made in accordance with the priorities and criteria adopted subsequent to public hearings. State agency project selection is based on that agency's program responsibility and consistency with the LWCF program.

Guidelines for determining priority statewide outdoor recreation needs through the Open Project Selection Process (OPSP) were derived from the California Outdoor Recreation Plan – 2002 and Public Opinions and Attitudes on Outdoor Recreation in California – 2002. In the first of these planning documents, issues were identified and actions offered. In the second, outdoor recreation needs as determined through a statewide, statistically valid random sample survey of Californians. In both cases, public participation processes were used to gather important data sets in gaining a better understanding of actual outdoor recreation needs.

The California Outdoor Recreation Plan (CORP) identifies issues, the current problems and opportunities most critical in California. Through the CORP, remedies or actions are identified by which public agencies might best address key issues. The CORP lays the foundation for addressing issues by identifying implications for the LWCF program. Addressing these implications sets the tone for scoring individual projects.

In determining public opinions and attitudes, a statewide survey was conducted by the State Department of Parks and Recreation through a contract with California State University, Chico. The survey asked a variety of attitudinal questions on topics relevant to or about outdoor recreation facilities, activities and services and a line of inquiry on outdoor recreation activity participation rates, unmet demand and public support.

The survey was conducted in two parts. The first part was a telephone survey and the second was a mail-back questionnaire. For the telephone survey a total of 2,512 interviews were completed, which had an associated sampling error +/- 2.1%. Respondents to the telephone survey were asked if they would be willing to complete a follow-up mail survey. A total of 610 mail surveys were completed with an associated sampling error of +/- 4.1% at the 95% confidence level. In

addition, a total of 144 mail-back youth (age 17 and younger) surveys were completed, which had a sampling error of +/- 9.5%.

From the survey data, three factors were used in establishing the activity ranking priorities: outdoor recreation participation rates, latent (unmet) demand and public support (those activities that public entities should give highest priority when spending public funds.) Latent demand and public support indices were developed and combined. The combined indices, coupled with participation rank, known demand from past years, and professional analysis were used to develop broad activity/facility groupings or categories. These broad groupings reflect those activities that typically require like facilities. For example, the trail category includes the whole suite of linear non-motorized outdoor recreation activities, including hiking, biking, equestrian and cross-country skiing.

The new OPSP consists of the following six components required by the National Park Service (NPS). These components are identified and explained in the following sections:

- Priority Rating Systems
- Project Selection Process
- Recurring Funding Cycle and Public Notification
- Program Technical Assistance for State and Local Projects
- Advisory Boards
- Public Participation

PRIORITY RATING SYSTEMS

Local projects that receive LWCF money are selected by the State Department of Parks and Recreation from proposals submitted by applicants from all over the state, using criteria and a selection process developed by the Department's Grants and Local Services Office and the Planning Division.

Each eligible state agency selects projects to receive its share of LWCF money, using criteria and selection processes developed by that agency. All the criteria used to select any state project are designed to be responsive to the major issues identified in the current CORP. In this way, the State is able to implement a consistent policy, across the board, for expenditure of these funds. At the same time, fund managers can be assured that there is a clear-cut connection between the criteria used to select LWCF projects and the issues identified in CORP.

The criteria and the scoring system used to select local projects are incorporated in the procedural guide for the LWCF program.

Local Projects

A priority rating system has been established for evaluation of local acquisition and development projects to ensure that the selection from among competing projects is fair and equitable, that projects are funded on their relative merits, and that the projects selected are those that most closely reflect the outdoor recreation needs portrayed in the 2002 CORP.

A detailed explanation of this system is included in the procedural guide for the LWCF program. The rating system was developed by the Office of Grants and Local Services and Planning Division of the State Department of Parks and Recreation. The system has been explained and reviewed at public hearings, and has been adopted by the State Liaison Officer (SLO), who is the Director of the State Department of Parks and Recreation.

The priorities and project criteria in the rating system reflect the extent to which project proposals conform to eligibility criteria outlined in the NPS Grants Manual, the need for the project as determined, the recreation issues identified by the California Outdoor Recreation Plan Advisory Committee and a survey of local park and recreation officials, and findings of the 2003 public opinion survey conducted for the State Department of Parks and Recreation, which determined latent demand.

State Agency Rating System

Each of four agencies receives a legislatively determined portion of the state share of the LWCF funds. These agencies have quite different mandates and programs set forth by the State Legislature. As a result, these agencies have a high degree of freedom to select the projects for which their portion will be used. Such projects, however, must still directly address one or more of the major outdoor recreation issues identified in CORP. The LWCF criteria used by each of the four state agencies are as follows:

1. The Department of Parks and Recreation is the largest state agency recipient of LWCF money. A small amount, typically five percent, is allocated for statewide planning, with the bulk being spent on the State Park System. The criteria used to select projects for the State Park System are designed to stimulate contributions from nonprofit organizations, and to facilitate acquisition projects for new park units near urban centers, critical additions to existing parks, or in-holdings in established parks. These criteria also encourage rehabilitation of deteriorating and outmoded facilities and development of campsites, picnic sites, and other popular facilities in areas where demand is demonstrably high.
2. The Wildlife Conservation Board (WCB) focuses its criteria on acquiring wildlife habitat — lands suitable for recreation and developing public access.

Specifically, WCB stresses projects where local operations and maintenance funds are available or involve rehabilitation of existing structures, development near urban areas, and design for disabled users.

3. The Department of Boating and Waterways uses economics as a dominant factor in consideration of its LWCF projects. A high benefit-to-cost ratio is a prominent criterion — buttressed by low-maintenance design and an expectation of high use. The Department also gives credit for facilities that are vandal proof, offer new or retrofitted access for people with disabilities, and provide better security for all users.
4. The Department of Water Resources uses its LWCF money for recreation components of the State Water Project. Generally, these facilities are extremely popular water-orientated attractions, and some are units of the State Park System. In general, LWCF money is used to provide better access and to protect existing areas and facilities.

PROJECT SELECTION PROCESS

Local Projects

This process, used by the State Department of Parks and Recreation to rank local project applications, establishes a priority for proposals to be funded under the LWCF program.

The selection process for local projects begins with receipt of an application, which is acknowledged by a letter from the Office of Grants and Local Services. The application is assigned to a project officer, who determines basic eligibility by checking the proposal against the screening criteria. If ineligible, the applicant is notified by a letter, and the project is not considered further.

If the project survives the screening process, the project officer notifies the applicant of any apparent deficiencies in the application, and arranges for an on-site inspection. If the project is subsequently selected for funding, there will be further requirements, such as a grant contract and compliance with federal and state laws. The applicant is informed about these requirements during the inspection. Following the on-site inspection, the application is evaluated by the project officer, who assigns a numerical score using the priorities and criteria in the Priority Rating System.

After all eligible projects are scored, they are listed in priority order and presented to the LWCF program manager, and the Chief of the Office of Grants and Local Services. These managers check to assure that the criteria and rating factors have been applied fairly, consistently, and objectively.

The final step in project selection is a detailed briefing to the SLO, who makes the final determination. After this final selection, State Legislators whose districts contain approved projects are notified. The SLO sends a letter to both the successful and unsuccessful applicants, informing them of the outcome.

Projects selected by the State are forwarded to the Western Regional Office of NPS for its approval, and to obligate the funds.

State Projects

State agency projects are selected by participating agencies and submitted to the SLO for their share of allocated funds. The Office of Grants and Local Services reviews each project to assure that it conforms to the eligibility criteria and priorities in CORP.

Eligible projects are forwarded by the SLO to NPS for funding.

RECURRING FUNDING CYCLE AND PUBLIC NOTIFICATION PROCESS

California's local LWCF Grants Program is administered on an annual cycle subject to federal fund availability. It begins with letters that are sent to all eligible applicants announcing the application deadline. The Secretary of the Interior issues the apportionment letter to the governor which notifies the State of the amount available to California from the LWCF.

Local Projects

Letters are sent to eligible applicants announcing the deadline for receipt of LWCF project applications in anticipation of the State receiving the annual apportionment for NPS. The schedule for the local program is:

January -	A public notice is sent to about 700 local jurisdictions in California, informing them that applications for the current fiscal year will be accepted until the deadline – the following May.
May -	Deadline for applications for that fiscal year.
May/July -	Applications are reviewed, analyzed, inspected, evaluated, and ranked by staff.
July -	After briefing by staff, the SLO selects a list of successful projects for the available funds. All applicants are notified of these decisions.

August/Sept. - Selected projects are forwarded to the Western Regional Office of NPS for approval and fund obligation.

This schedule gives local applicants at least four months, January to June, to prepare a complete application. This extended period is necessary to allow enough time to go through the public review process of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and to comply with the National Historical Preservation Act.

Also, the schedule allows the State to submit its selected projects to NPS in time for federal approval and obligation of funds prior to the end of the federal fiscal year, September 30.

State Projects

The SLO notifies eligible state agencies of their share of the annual allocation of the LWCF monies as soon as the apportionment letter to the governor is received. Applications are then accepted by the Department for review and transmittal to NPS.

State and Local Projects

Each year since the start of the LWCF Program in 1965, California has notified potential applicants of the program, and has encouraged applications to be submitted for available funds.

More than 700 letters are mailed annually to all potentially eligible state agencies, cities, counties, and park and recreation districts that have the authority and responsibility for acquiring and developing park and recreation areas and facilities. These letters announce the application deadline, and any changes in the grant program. The Office of Grants and Local Services also sends out periodic reminders of the program and continually has information on the program posted on the Department website.

PROGRAM TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FOR STATE AND LOCAL PROJECTS

The following program assistance is available on request to all potential applicants, both before and after submission of applications:

- Project officers from the Office of Grants and Local Services will answer questions, provide instructions, and offer guidance for obtaining LWCF assistance. Workshops will be offered as needed to assist grant seekers in filing applications or interpreting program requirements.

- The Department publishes a procedural guide for the LWCF Program that provide potential applicants with all the procedures and forms required to successfully submit, administer, and complete LWCF proposals.
- Since 1964, California has developed over 40 state-funded park and recreation grant programs of it's own. The grants from these programs are disseminated to virtually every city, county, and recreation district in the State and to many non profit organizations. Project officers are in frequent contact with every eligible applicant in California, and frequently identify the program as a potential matching source for state and local projects throughout California.
- The Department's comprehensive mailing list of all eligible applicants is used to distribute brochures, procedural guides, application information, notices of criteria hearings, and other items of interest. Lists are also maintained of special interest groups, professional and community organizations, and others who have expressed an interest in the Department's grant programs. These individuals and groups are contacted and invited to participate in the review of any changes in the LWCF Program. The staff of the Office of Grants and Local Services is active in the annual California Park and Recreation Conference.

ADVISORY BOARDS

While use of advisory boards to assist the State on LWCF proposal selection is not required, it is encouraged by NPS. During preparation of the current CORP update, a 15-member advisory board composed of representatives from city, county, state, and federal government agencies; the California Park and Recreation Society; the State Park and Recreation Commission; educators, private consultants, and suppliers of private recreation facilities played an important role.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

The process for developing the 2002 California Outdoor Recreation Plan started with a series of five regional workshops culminating in a "Vision Summit" held in 2000. Following this, an Advisory Committee was established. Along the way input was received through a number of workshops and mailings involving a wide array of educators, professionals, stakeholders, community groups, and individuals. The plan was discussed at educational sessions at the California Park and Recreation Society Conference, the Park and Recreation Administrators Institute, and the California Roundtable on Recreation, Parks, and Tourism. A briefing was provided to members of the State Park and Recreation

Commission and their comments were solicited. A “final draft” plan was posted on the Department's web site for public review and comment.

Local Projects

Federal guidelines require that the State's OPSP be subject to public review and comment prior to implementation. This is to assure that preparation and revision of the project selection processes and priority rating systems are equitable and based on citizen involvement and public participation. In California, public involvement in preparation of the CORP and formulation of criteria used in evaluating grant projects is achieved through several methods. California state law requires the State Department of Parks and Recreation to hold public hearings when adopting or revising project selection criteria. The Department conducted focus group meetings throughout the state, while developing the draft procedural guide. Focus group meetings were attended by potential applicants and interested parties. After the focus groups meetings, the draft guidelines were revised and posted on the Department's website and notice was given by mail of the 30 day public comment period and of public hearings in the north and south state. These hearings are open to the public, and are generally attended by officials of cities, counties, and districts who represent the public.

Public involvement in selection of local projects is also attained at the local level. As a minimum, the State requires each application for funds to be accompanied by a resolution from the governing body sponsoring the project. The resolutions are adopted at public meetings where the opportunity for involvement is offered. A project application will receive higher priority for a greater degree of substantiated public participation in development and approval of the proposal.

Additionally, local projects must conform to distribution and filing of public notices required under the CEQA. Filing of these notices triggers a public review period, which must occur before the application can be processed.

State Projects

The Department of Parks and Recreation submits projects for the State Park System. The projects must comply with the general plan for the park unit. These plans are developed with extensive public involvement, including hearings, survey questionnaires, and public workshops. In addition, each general plan must be approved by the State Park and Recreation Commission, which holds public meetings that must conform to the State's “Open Meeting Act.” All notices of commission meetings are announced in advance through news media, and are sent to those on a mailing list that includes anyone interested in commission activities. Commission meetings agendas and minutes are also distributed to those on the list.

Most Department acquisitions exceed \$500,000, and thus require a public hearing. The Department must report the findings of the hearings to the State Legislature, and must receive approval from the Public Works Board.

Projects of the Department of Water Resources and Department of Boating and Waterways must be approved by the State Legislature and the Public Works Board, which review and approve projects at open meetings. In addition, Water Resources projects are reviewed and discussed at State Water Commission meetings, which are also open to the public. Boating and Waterways projects developed in units of the State Park System are subject to review by the State Park and Recreation Commission.

The Wildlife Conservation Board is somewhat more autonomous than the other Department's in the Resources Agency because it does not need to seek legislative or Public Works Board approval for all of its projects. The Board consists of three members -- the Chairman of the State Fish and Game Commission (a private citizen) and two State Departmental directors (Fish and Game and Finance) -- who decide on approval of projects. In addition, three members of each house of the State Legislature meet with the Wildlife Conservation Board to ensure legislative awareness and input.

Finally, as with local projects, all state projects must conform to the public notice distribution and filing requirements of the CEQA and NEPA.

Performance Measures

The Department uses the LWCF Procedural Guide with its eligibility and ranking criteria to assure that projects selected meet the requirements of the Land and Water Conservation program and the goals of the CORP. The Department also assures through frequent contact with applicant agencies that the projects are completed on a timely basis and remain open to the public upon completion.